

HYPERALLERGIC

Best of 2015: Our Top 10 Exhibitions Across the United States

December 16, 2015

We love NYC and LA and all the art they have to offer, but we know they're only two towns of *many* across the country mounting great exhibitions large and small. So we tried to travel and see a lot of shows this year, even though it's next to impossible to be comprehensive with a list like this (and we surely missed a lot). From Nick Cave's Detroit takeover to a retrospective of the artist known as Mr. Imagination, here are our picks for the best exhibitions of 2015 across the United States.

#1 – *International Pop* at the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis)

April 11–August 29

'Tis the year of the rethinking of Pop, and though I haven't seen Tate Modern's current take, I was lucky enough to catch the Walker Art Center's. The curatorial choices and layout of *International Pop* didn't always make sense, but what it lacked in cohesion it made up for in sheer amazingness of artwork. The highlights for me were strong, thought-provoking selections of work from Brazil — where Pop was intensely, resolutely political — and from Japan — where it was psychedelic and sometimes grotesque. This expansion of the parameters and definition of Pop art has been in the works for a while now, but it's beyond overdue. The sharpness of the artwork here gave Pop back its relevance and its bite. —*Jillian Steinhauer*

#2 – *Nick Cave: Here Hear* at Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills, MI)

June 20–October 11

It wasn't just the dazzling retrospective array of Nick Cave's *Soundsuits* and other works, nor the newly commissioned pieces on display under the curation of Laura Mott, that made this exhibition so outstanding — it was the consistent engagement with Detroiters of all stripes in the creation of original dance pieces, photo and video shoots, and public celebrations that transcended traditional divisions between the city proper and its more affluent and whiter suburbs. The connections fostered by Here Hear will not soon be forgotten. The events, much like the *Soundsuits* themselves, carried profound social critique beneath their appealing and colorful exteriors. An awing spectacle with a resounding message. —*Sarah Rose Sharp*

#3 – *Lynda Benglis: Water Sources* at Storm King Art Center (Mountainville, NY)

May 16–November 8

Lynda Benglis is one of those rare sculptors who manages to consistently imbue her artworks with a feeling of aliveness. Her curving, twisting, pouring, dripping creations look like they've been caught mid-motion. So, it was an excellent match for Benglis to be showing at Storm King, a sculpture park that emphasizes the interplay between artworks and their environment. Being able to see her majestic "Hill and Clouds" amid real hills and clouds, or watching the water gush out of and onto her various fountain sculptures, changed my understanding of her work. And the accompanying mini-survey in the indoor galleries deepened it. —*JS*

#4 – NO MAN’S LAND: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection at the Rubell Family Collection (Miami)

December 2, 2015–May 28, 2016

Spread across the institution’s 28 galleries, [this exhibition](#) includes dozens of female artists and is one of the Rubell Collection’s strongest showings in years. From the huge installations by Solange Pessoa to the conceptual minimalism of Janine Antoni, room after room is a dialogue of styles and worldviews that shows the passion of collectors who still look carefully at art as a way to understand the world. The show vaguely asks what it means to show art by women, and the answer is as messy and inconclusive as it should be. —*Hrag Vartanian*

#5 – The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC)

April 3–August 30

Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s paintings appear like remembered dreams, both magic and mundane, with distorted circus ladies in vivid colors and an angular scene of a boy stealing a piece of fruit from a bowl. This year the Smithsonian American Art Museum gave the late artist [a long-deserved retrospective](#), showing his work as [poised at the center](#) of American modernism, folk art influences, and his Japanese heritage. Considering his legacy of otherworldly art — influenced by the destruction of World War II — and the racism and government restrictions against him as a Japanese immigrant at that time, the exhibition felt especially valuable now, with immigration tensions high. It revealed an artist drawn to both the grotesque and the beautiful in the visual culture of his adopted country. —*Allison Meier*

#6 – Michael Meads: Bent Not Broken at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (New Orleans)

October 3, 2015–February 28, 2016

No word is as over- and misused as “epic” these days, but the sprawling [Michael Meads retrospective](#) at the [Ogden Museum of Southern Art](#) in New Orleans is a potent reminder of its true meaning. Meads’s large-scale charcoal drawings infuse grand spectacle and historical episodes — everything from the AIDS crisis to Hurricane Katrina — with a heady mixture of sex, death, disaster, and celebration, and his sharply observed and precisely rendered smaller pieces and photographs are no less affecting and powerful. It’s a beautifully organized exhibition of work by a major regional artist who deserves to be more widely known. —*John d’Addario*

#7 – Renée Stout: Tales of the Conjure Woman at the Wellin Museum (Clinton, NY)

October 3–December 20

Few contemporary artists exploring the narrative possibilities of art are doing it so compellingly and inventively as the Washington, DC–based Renée Stout, who crafts incredibly sharp *trompe l’oeil* paintings and objects [so convincingly worn and weathered](#) you can’t believe they aren’t found objects — and, just to make the illusion more confounding, she incorporates all manner of found objects. This show [brought together](#) an impressive range of works — including paintings, sculptures, glass, mixed media installations, photos, and prints — to tell a story about Fatima Mayfield, a conjurer who uses hoodoo traditions to concoct potions and cast spells. At times Stout’s work was so strong that it was hard to tell where her magic ended and Mayfield’s began. —*Benjamin Sutton*

#8 – Welcome to the World of Mr. Imagination at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art (Chicago)

January 9–May 24

When Chicago native Gregory Warmack (1948–2012) was 30 years old he was mugged, shot, and left for dead. During his recovery he had an epiphany and decided to devote the rest of his life to art and go by the name “Mr. Imagination.” The sculptures he produced over the ensuing three decades, brought together for this compact yet vast retrospective, often riff on forms taken from traditional African art, with a dash of the regal pomp of European courts, all rendered in his own characteristic media — mainly paintbrushes and metal bottle caps. Amid all the staffs, thrones, busts, talismans, and religious figures, one felt truly immersed in an alternate universe of boundless optimism and constant celebration — yet not without its share of hardship and pain. —BS

#9 – SiTE:LAB’s Rumsey Street Project at ArtPrize (Grand Rapids, MI)

September 23–October 11

It’s easy to do ruined-spaces and abandoned-building art badly, much harder to do it well. Michigan nonprofit SiTE:LAB has become something of a master of the form, as proven by its project for this year’s ArtPrize. SiTE:LAB took over an entire block of abandoned properties — houses, churches, a garage, and more — and divvied them up among artists to do with them as they pleased. So many of the results were stunning, from Kate Gilmore’s pink performance house to Nick Kline’s striped shrine, to the side-by-side “State of Exception” and Mandy Cano Villalobos installations. There were a few weak links, but for the most part artists approached their sites with an impressive amount of creativity and respect for the ground on which they were standing. —JS



Detail of Kate Gilmore’s “Higher Ground” at the Rumsey Street Project (photo by Jillian Steinhauer/Hyperallergic)

#10 – US IS THEM at the Pizzuti Collection (Columbus, OH)

September 18, 2015–April 2, 2016

The sheer diversity and scope of this group show are impressive on their own, but the high caliber of the work on display, and the thoughtful mix of international artists like Yinka Shonibare MBE, big-name Americans like Kara Walker, and local treasures like Aminah Robinson, give it a richness of perspective and experience. Elements of the show appear throughout the museum’s three floors, their arrangement creating bold connections: on the second floor Titus Kaphar’s “Doubt” kneels as if beholding Kehinde Wiley’s “Treisha Lowe,” while an entire gallery on the main floor is dominated by “Family Tree,” a series of self-portraits by Zhang Huan that chronicles a buildup of inked poetry upon his face, eventually rendering him a featureless black entity. The exhibition is a remarkable showcase of a highly eclectic private collection, presented in an accessible and engaging manner. —SR

Honorable Mentions

Project Gallery: Gary Simmons at the Pérez Art Museum Miami

November 14, 2014–November 1, 2015

Painted directly on a 30-foot-high-by-29-foot-wide gallery wall, Gary Simmons's "Frozen in Time" mural was an ephemeral monument to sportsmen who were forced into a system that exploited their differences and erased their identities in favor of larger-than-life fabrications. Simmons evoked the didacticism of chalkboards, the design flourishes of sideshow attractions, and the scale of greatness. But I don't think this commissioned work was only about the past; its context suggested that the art industry of today (like the sports industry of a century ago) may be generating and churning out idols that are poised to fall just as quickly. —HV

Tsz Yan Ng: The Visibility of Labor at 9338 Campau (Hamtramck, MI)

October 24–November 14

The only thing more astonishing than the painstaking processes by which a department-store black dress is made are the lengths that artist Tsz Yan Ng went to capture them. Traveling to Shantou, China, Tsz Yan documented the work of a garment factory literally end-to-end, including the casting of every pair of hands that contributed to the making of a certain little black dress. Exquisitely detailed and ghostly versions of these 17 pairs of hands emerged from the walls of 9338 Campau, as though pushing through from a spirit world far away from the reality of the consumer. As, of course, they are. Breaking down the humanity of this object so easily taken for granted forced viewers to consider how many hands have touched all the possessions that surround us. —SRS

Deana Lawson: Ruttenberg Contemporary Photography Series at the Art Institute of Chicago

September 5, 2015–January 10, 2016

In a year in which Black Lives Matter was both a rallying cry and a depressing reminder, Deana Lawson's gorgeous yet complicated portraits felt especially relevant. Lawson's photographs feature black people in locales ranging from Detroit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, giving looks that sear themselves into memory and smolder. —Lilly Lampe